New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

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Theatre Openings

"Two on the Aisle"

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Two on the Aisle"

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

July 20, 1951

Bert Lahr Superb In a Lively Revue

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

They forgot the calendar last night and brought a lively and funny revue into the Hellinger Theater, the kind of a show that just isn't supposed to come in until all the fashionable people are back in town and the regular season is under way. Whenever that is, the fall will hardly produce a clown in Bert Lahr's class. And his blond and blithe co-worker, Dolores Gray, is somebody to cheer about. That's what Londoners did during all those months that she played "Annie Get Your Gun" in West End.

"Two on the Aisle," submitted by Arthur Lesser before an audience that was surprised by the pace of the show, and the humor in it, has several good songs and some amusing sketches; they don't fall apart at the finish. It offers good-looking girls, bright costumes and backgrounds, and the direction of Abe Burrows has kept everything moving along. And it has, in Mr. Lahr, a comedian who belongs with the great of the theater's passing parade. He is one of the few survivors of a vanishing profession.

A Superior Mountebank.

Mr. Lahr's mournful physiognomy, which can suddenly take on the brightness of the morning sunlight, is again a welcome sight as he slouches and shuffles through "Two on the Aisle." He is back with his grimaces and his gutterals, his leers and his shrugs and his idiotic grins. His face is as flexible and as flexuous as it always was; he is still a man of eye-rolling and eye-bulging, and whether he is playing a mildly goofy baseball pitcher or a paper-picker for the Park Department, Captain Universe of the Space Brigade or Siegfried in a burlesque of the Met, he is a superior mountebank, a comedian who learned many a trick on the old Burlesque Wheel and who has since thought up a few of his own.

Dolores Has Zest, Style.

Funny as he is, Mr. Lahr isn't the whole show, and he doesn't have to carry it, either. Dolores Gray is a song-and-dance girl with zest and style and good looks. She fairly snaps out her lyrics in "If You Hadn't, But You Did." She croons with fine effect in "There Never Was a Baby Like My Baby," sings gaily in "Give a Little, Get a Little Love," and she is tremendously amusing as the susceptible secretary to a preoccupied architect, played by the great Lahr.

Elliott Reed comes along with some savage and devastatingly accurate mimicry on members of the Kefauver Committee; Colette Marchand, dark and swift and graceful, is a slithering dancer.

A Sprightly Revue.

I could have taken the evening without the ballet number, "The Guide Book," but that's an old prejudice, which even Agnes deMille and Michael Kidd haven't quite cured. The new revue has been served well by Jule Styne in his music writing and by Betty Comden and Adolph Green with their sketches. And all through, there is the feeling, that in Abe Burrows' direction, it has had a professional at work.

"Two on the Aisle," brazenly produced three months ahead of its time, is a sprightly revue. If you've been of the impression that the great stage comedians are either dead or in some other branch of the entertainment business, just drop in at the Hellinger and spend an evening with Bert Lahr. Let the living theater keep and cherish him.

"TWO ON THE AISLE"

Musical revue with music by Jule Styne; lyrics and sketches by Betty Comden and Adolph Green; staged by Abe Burrows; musical numbers staged by Ted Cappy; settings by Howard Bay; costumes by Joan Personette; presented by Arthur Lesser at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, July 19, 1951, with a cast including the following: Bert Lahr, Dolores Gray, Elliott Reid, Colette Marchand, Stanley Prager, Robert Gallagher, Larry Laurence, Arthur Rubin, Walter Kelvin, Frank Reynolds, Jeannette Aquilina, John Kelly, Bob Emmett, Alan LeRoy, Richard Gray, J. C. McCord, Vera Lee, Gloria Danyl, Margery Beddow, Arthur Arney, Jane Mason, Kathryne Mylroie, John Raye, Victor Reilley, Dell Parker, Mira Stefan, Paul Lyday, Betty Buday, Fred Bryan, Jerry Fries, Patricia Tobin, Leila Martin, Charlotte Van Lein, Gregg Evans, Jeanne Tyler, Dorothy Etheridge, John Allen, Rosemary Kittelton, Doris Goodwin, and Gordon Hamilton.

DAILY NEWS

July 20, 1951

'Two on the Aisle' Has Bert Lahr, But It Needs Better Stuff for Him

By JOHN CHAPMAN

When Bert Lahr is mugging or Dolores Gray is singing, "Two on the Aisle" is okay, I suppose. But, since they can't be on the stage of the Mark Hellinger Theatre all the time, there is quite a bit of time in between that I can't account for very well. The revue opened last night to a large house of Broadway friends who were hoping that Adolph Green and Betty Comden, the authors, and Jule Styne, the composer, had turned out something really bright and snappy.

Some of the sketches are pretty funny—or at least they start out that way. Lahr, for instance, as Captain Universe, commander of the Space Brigade, invading the planet Venus. Or Lahr as Siegfried in a Rudolph Bing, or souped-up, hodgepodge of Wagnerian operas. Or Lahr as a frustrated paper-picker in Central Park(probably the best sketch of the lot, written by Nat Hiken and Billy Friedberg). But, no matter how nicely the sketches start, they don't know when or how to quit—and what good's a sketch without a good, fast blackout?

Right Out Loud.

Miss Gray is something rare as a singer—you can hear her. She is a well-constructed female baritone, and when she sings she sings right out loud. I guess she, Ethel Merman and Mary Martin are the only ones like that left. Miss Gray also partners Mr. Lahr very nicely in some of the sketches. Trouble is, I can't remember her song unless I look in the program for the titles. I rather like a novelty number she does, though, titled "Give a Little, Get a Little Love."

I also have to look in the program to remind myself that Colette Marchand, the French dancer with the legs, is a featured member of the cast. Mlle. Marchand looks as devilish and slinky as ever in a couple of dance numbers—but whoever devised the choreography for these bits was no Roland Petit. In fact, the dancing in "Two on the Aisle" is generally dispirited and routine.

Perhaps the best few moments of the show are provided by a personable young man, Elliott Reid, who does a five-minute summary of the Kefauver crime quiz panel, imitating all the voices. Mr. Reid manages to make Rudolph Halley sound funnier than Halley.

The sets, by Howard Bay, and the costumes, by Joan Personette, are all right. Anyhow, they didn't fall down or fall off last night. Abe Burrows directed "Two on the Aisle."

Memo to Santa Claus: Can't you fix it next Christmas for Bert Lahr to get material that is as funny as he is? Then we'd have a dandy revue.

The New York Times
July 20, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Thanks to Bert Lahr and Dolores Gray, the rest of the summer is going to be mighty pleasant on Broadway. They opened at the Mark Hellinger last evening in an excellent, light revue entitled for no particular reason "Two on the Aisle."

As a matter of fact, the thanks ought to be more broadly distributed. For Betty Comden and Adolph Green have written the pithiest material any revue has had in these parts for a long time; and Jule Styne's music is all right, too.

* * *

Among those who make the evening professional and festive is Colette Marchand, a brilliant dancer with skill and temperament, to say nothing of Gallic chic. And Elliott Reid, an able second man, rocks the audience with a pungent parody of the Kefauver Committee grimacing and growling over the television screen.

But appreciation of all the talent that has gone into this midsummer night's convention will not prevent us from recognizing "Two on the Aisle" as the show that has restored Mr. Lahr in all his warmth and lunacy and has revealed Miss Gray to New York as a very accomplished singer and entertainer.

Miss Comden and Mr. Green are the right litterateurs for Mr. Lahr's comic antics. He wraps that creased mug and those startled eyes around their impish sketches and lets loose that madman's ululation that has delighted America for years.

* * *

Sometimes in the past Mr. Lahr has had to work too hard to make an evening uproarious. But the material in "Two on the Aisle" fits him better than those baggy suits he affects; and in one memorable number, by Nat Hiken and William Friedberg, he gets a little honest pathos out of the grotesquerie. This is all good, stout, broad, hearty buffoonery in the best tradition of music-hall clowning. It even includes a parody of T. S. Eliot that is both intelligent and funny. Mr. Lahr has not been in such good form since "Life Begins at 8:40" and "The Show Is On."

For the past two or three decades, or at any rate it seems so, Miss Gray has been stunning British audiences with her performing in "Annie Get Your Gun." Now that she is back in America, the State Department should refuse her any more visas. Miss Gray has a voice that can be heard over an orchestra pit, and she has style. In "Two on the Aisle" she appears in a number of songs and sketches in various genres—sentimental, melancholy, wistful and comic.

She has a fresh approach to everything that comes her way. And since, like Mr. Lahr, she is a theatre professional, she goes from one mood to another with no apparent effort and with no loss of force and character.

There is a lot to praise in "Two on the Aisle"—Howard Bay's simple but beautiful scenery; Joan Personette's crisp and glowing costumes; the easy, brisk staging of the musical numbers by Ted Cappy; and Abe Burrows' pleasant staging of the entire production.

Everything goes so agreeably in "Two on the Aisle" that you are not so much overwhelmed as entertained. Miss Marchand is a superb, fluent dancer who can make her points without having to raise a rumpus. And Mr. Lahr and Miss Gray are a well-matched pair of thoroughbreds. This is genuine entertainment, full of brains, talent, wit, humor and splendor.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**
July 20, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY Jr.

Bert Lahr Back—But . . .

THE revue "Two on the Aisle" dropped into the Mark Hellinger Theater Thursday night, bringing along a few good but undeveloped comedy ideas and music to match. With Bert Lahr in the sketches, Dolores Gray for the songs and Colette Marchand leading the dances, there is a large amount of individual showmanship let loose in this collection of jokes and tunes. Since Betty Comden and Adolph Green did the lyrics and skits, Jule Styne composed the music and Abe Burrows staged the show, one might expect a smart, agile interlude of topical fun for the summer season. Unfortunately these signposts are misleading. "Two on the Aisle" leaves memories of a laugh or two and a snatch of melody, but the greater part of it is mechanical stuff, sold with more energy than is present in the material.

* * *

Almost all the sketches have a good basic joke to act out, but they trail off to damp finishes instead of building. Bert Lahr goes through the motions as a baseball player being interviewed on television; as Captain Universe, a space pilot five centuries in the future; as a park attendant trying to fill his bag with waste paper, or as a burlesque comic giving a T. S. Eliot version of a typical burlesque bedroom scene. Lahr is a durable clown who can fill in gaps with his private collection of personality sight gags or strange vocal noises, but the timing of these skits seems to be way off. They have the right satirical subjects without holding up very far past the point at which the comedian enters dressed in a funny costume and making funny faces.

* * *

The score is even less colorful than the comedy, though Dolores Gray gives it the benefit of a commanding stage presence and a strong, persuasive delivery. Its most catchy number is called "Give a Little, Get a Little Love," but here the lyrics are far too complex for a very simple but rather pleasant tune. The production includes two ballet numbers allowing Miss Marchand to display coquettishly what may very well be the most attractive pair of dancing limbs in the business, and this part of "Two on the Aisle" is all on the credit side. There is far less allure in the various arrangements of undressed showgirls, or in a romantic pageant combining the colors green, violet, yellow and pink in a scheme which appears dismal to this artistically untutored eye.

* * *

Elliott Reid hangs around as an extra man in the sketches, but he creates one of the high spots of the evening out of a one-man reenactment of the Kefauver Committee hearings in which he takes all the parts with a devastating accuracy. When spending a larger effort on a burlesque of Wagnerian opera, or worrying the old joke about psychiatry and infants, "Two on the Aisle" bogs down from spontaneous amusement to a heavily forced presentation of verbal and visual humor. There are the makings of a show in Reid's monologue, Miss Gray's voice, Miss Marchand's legs and the vision of Bert Lahr in a space suit. But the extension of these assets and the finishing touches are missing in the mediocre foolishness at the Mark Hellinger.

Journal American
July 20, 1951

Dolores Is Delightful

By ROBERT GARLAND

From where I sit, which is well over on the right side, a new-style, old-fashioned, high-brow, low-brow revue is at the Mark Hellinger, brought in by Arthur Lesser. It stars Bert Lahr and, in smaller type, Dolores Gray. Featured are Elliott Reid, a monologist, and Colette Marchand, a refugee from "Les Ballets de Paris."

Mr. Lahr has at last some new material, supplied, as programs say, by Betty Comden and Adolph Green. To this new material he brings all the talent which he has developed during three decades. Miss Gray has at last come into her own, I would be surprised if her name is not in as big type as Mr. Lahr by day after tomorrow.

Mr. Reid, if you go in for monologists, is the best I have ever seen. His "Here's What You Said," done without help from anyone, is much better than your own television. Miss Marchand is Miss Marchand. You like her or you do not. I like her. I like her very much indeed. And she can dance. She does so, frequently.

As for the chorus girls, they are very easy on the eye. As for the chorus boys, they are perfectly all right. As for Jule Styne's music, that is good and loud.

* * *

There is small reason to be surprised if, in the long run, this "Two on the Aisle" is remembered for Dolores Gray. Even if her type is smaller than Mr. Lahr's, she is wonderful. She has everything but subtlety and I am tired of most of that. I like to think what she would do with a real good song.

As they are, she does all right with "Hold Me Tight," "There Never Was a Baby Like My Baby," "Give a Little, Get a Little Love" and Brunnhilde's burlesque number. And with her fellow star, whose name is in larger type than hers, as well as without him, she acts professionally. But the best thing about her is Dolores Gray.

For Dolores Gray is the truest talent to arrive on Broadway since, say, Ethel Merman or Mary Martin. But, when you come to it, she is not like anybody but herself. I do not remember her in "The Seven Lively Arts." I do remember her in "Are You With It?" I did not see her in "Annie Get Your Gun" except for a snatch in last season's ANTA Album.

I wish I had. And I do thank England for giving her back to us after three years of starring over there. If we know what we are going to the theatre for, we will keep her many a year to come. Anyway, she is now the bright new star of the new-style, old-fashion, high-brow, low-brow revue on Broadway.

* * *

Elliott Reid and, in larger type, Colette Marchand, should also be praised. He for his monologues. She for herself. Mr. Reid does